

MAKING STUDENTS MORE ACTIVE IN LEARNING THE PASSIVE

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Abstract

Why are students of English so reluctant to use the passive voice? The answer to this question may lie in the fact that students find it artificial, even pretentious, partly because it really does tend to be overtly wordy and cumbersome. Moreover, a point often overlooked is that the Croatian language “favours” the active structure as more natural both in informal and formal discourse, which is why students often find it difficult to adopt the passive voice as characteristic of the English language. Also, both for learners of English and native speakers of the language, the passive structure may be felt as contrary to the more common subject-verb-object (or S-O-V) order of syntactic constituents in the transitive sentence, employed profusely in the majority of Indo-European languages.

Nonetheless, not only is it expected of the students to appreciate the passive, but also to use it competently. A great deal of academic English courses focus on formal communication; which makes the passive of key importance to understanding the type of language prevalent in EAP. This type of discourse is essential to studying English at university level, in the authors’ case ESP in the field of international relations and diplomacy, where study materials abound with passive structures.

The aim of the paper is to show that the passive is fairly simple and easy both to understand and apply in independent production since it follows a set of formulaic instructions with little or no exceptions to the rule. It will look into examples of texts such as newspaper articles, legislation, professional literature, etc., and provide various activities used as a springboard for the acquisition of passive structures.

Key words: passive voice, formal discourse, activities in EAP, ESP

1. Introduction

Students' opinions on the passive predominantly point to the fact that they either avoid to use it (unconsciously) or, if they do use it, they do so tentatively because of perceived complexity and awkwardness, whereby the passive is rendered almost inappropriate. It is also interesting to note that, before the term "passive voice" is introduced, the students use the structure relatively confidently and with few mistakes. So, on the unconscious level, students feel competent to use it because they grow accustomed to it over the course of time, and it simply "sounds right", as they often put it. Once the passive structure is given a "name", however, they become self-conscious and alarmed, referring to it as something extremely difficult and horrible.

Among other things, when asked to describe how they perceive the passive voice, they call it "the language of Yoda", "the language of poetry", "unnatural", "sophisticated and academic", etc. Even though not all of these attributes can be classified as negative or derogatory, it is rather obvious that the students perceive the passive as difficult, demanding and complex, perhaps even too complex to be used consciously. In order to understand the underlying causes of this obvious disinclination, the passive voice needs to be looked at as both the grammatical structure and what is being communicated.

2. What makes the passive voice so difficult to learn?

On the communicative or pragmatic level, the perceived pretentiousness of the passive has made it unfashionable – it sounds more learned, more complex, "sophisticated and academic". More profoundly, it is often perceived as artificial ("used only in poetry", according to the students) or even cumbersome and convoluted due to its so-called "reverse order". The "conventional" subject-verb-object (or S-O-V) sentence structure, where the object is identified as the patient, accounts for a large majority of world languages.[7][10] This compels the conclusion that the S-V-O word order, in which the initial place in the sentence is conventionally occupied by the agent, is more commonly used, more natural, direct, clear and concise, so its communicative function is more emphasized, more openly directed toward the listener or the reader, or the receiver of communication. All this leads to the fact that students avoid using passive structures, especially in spoken communication, where the active voice is constantly gaining ground.

On the surface level, the passive is simply wordier, because in order to form it, we have to employ the auxiliary verb to be, literally adding to its "wordiness/verboseness". Grammatically, it requires skill and adept knowledge of several distinct grammatical

categories: verb tenses, verb forms (the base form, the –s, the –ing, the past and the past participle), grammatical function of sentence constituents (the verb and its arguments; the subject, the object), agreement, verb transitivity and finally the voice, i.e. the recognition of whether the subject acts or is acted upon. [2][5]

Confusions mostly abound among students about certain features of the passive voice. For instance, the passive voice may, as we all know, be used in various tenses. Students, however, perceive the passive verb structure as tense switching, not being able to differentiate between verb tense (grammatical category used to express the present, the past and the future) and verb voice (grammatical category used to express the relationship between the verb and its arguments – the subject and the object).

Another compelling argument “against” the passive is derived from our students’ mother tongue, Croatian. Since all the observations made throughout this paper are based on experiences from the Croatian ESP classroom, it may be deserving of consideration to mention briefly the status of the passive voice in the students’ native language.

One of the reasons for the predominance of the active voice in Croatian is the normative status of the passive; it has been described as an undesirable imposition or import from Germanic languages, which only adds to its rigidity and austerity. By the same token, due to the negative normativization of the passive, found in many prominent language reference books, the passive is often overlooked and neglected in a number of functional styles or subsystems of the Croatian language, except perhaps in publicist/newspaper style, scientific and the poetic functional style. Passivity in the Croatian language is more often expressed or signalled by other grammatical categories (various paraphrases) than by means of syntactic transformation, i.e. passivization. According to generative grammar, the passive sentence is derived from the active sentence via rules of transformation. The active sentence is considered to be the core, underlying structure (the deep structure – pure representation of relations within a sentence), while the passive sentence is the surface form derived from the common deep structure (surface structure – one of the final syntactic forms of a sentence, as it exists after the deep structure has been modified syntactically). This is why it is often considered that the two types of utterances are not of equal value. [1] [3]

On the other hand, the Croatian language can “afford” not to use the passive voice as often as some other languages, notably Germanic languages such as English. In comparison to the English language, the Croatian language abounds in various paraphrastic models (considering it is a flective language, which means that grammatical relations are conveyed by means of morphemes, it is rather superior in the flexibility of word order), whereas English,

being an analytic language (in which various grammatical relations are expressed by means of syntax), lacks similar possibilities or techniques to vary the sentence perspective. The S-V-O pattern needs to be observed more consistently, which means that the passive voice serves not merely as voice but also as a useful construction that allows for the highlighting of patients (objects) in cases when agents (subjects) are inert or redundant. [3]

Hundreds of African opponents of apartheid refuse to receive food ... demanding a fair trial or to be released (Cro. = that they release them) [3]

Majority of the prisoners have never been brought to trial (Cro. = they have never brought the majority of the prisoners to trial) [3]

3. Why is the passive voice necessary for students of EAP?

After considering all the “negative” aspects of the passive voice and almost arriving at the conclusion that it has become obsolete, why is it still necessary for students to acquire it and use it competently?

First of all, even though the use of the passive seems to be resisted from many sides, it is beyond question that it has an innate capability to turn an utterance into a more impersonal, detached and thus more formal statement by removing the agent (subject) of the action from the sentence, which is a requirement in technical, scientific and academic writing. While the active is considered more direct, succinct and authoritative, it may sometimes be problematic if one’s priority is to sound as polite as possible and avoid condescension (e.g. *You must address the ambassadors as Mr./Madam Ambassador.*). It is also a prerequisite in EAP, notably diplomatic etiquette; code of conduct, protocolary situations and in this particular case of ESP in international relations and diplomacy.

Furthermore, the syntactic features of the passive are rather simple and straightforward in that the rules are elementary and unambiguous: it is just a different way of showing who is doing the action in a sentence and who is receiving it. The object (patient) of the active sentence becomes the subject (agent) of the passive one, and then the verb assumes the passive shape (auxiliary *to be* and past participle of the main verb), followed by an optional remark on the object (or the subject of the passive sentence), and indicated prepositionally (*by*).

Why is learning the passive essential for students of international relations and diplomacy? For competent users of foreign languages – future diplomats – the passive is an everyday tool, both in comprehension and production, especially in formal discourse. Formal discourse is the primary medium of language instruction in this specific field of ESP/EAP,

which draws heavily upon international current affairs as a springboard for the acquisition of structures of professional language usage.

The study programme of international relations and diplomacy centres upon materials which abound with such structures (newspaper articles, legislation, and professional literature). Additionally, as part of their academic training, students learn how to write essays and papers, and are not infrequently instructed to use the passive instead of personal pronouns (I or we) to avoid sounding self-absorbed or egotistic, in which case the passive helps exhibit a more professional and impartial note, allowing the writer to omit personal involvement in an inconspicuous manner. This also allows the language instructor to address the sentence from two different levels, the active and the passive, so as to broaden the students' understanding of syntax.

Ultimately, their future job/profession will also mostly involve formal communication (gathering information, giving speeches, briefing the media, conducting meetings, handling formal correspondence), which employs a great deal of passive structures. And finally, it cannot be left out of account that the language of politics, law and the media often exploits passive structures to avoid responsibility, to pacify the reader or the overall situation or to eliminate unwanted information.

4. Facilitating the students' acquisition of passive structures

The aim of this paper is to show that teaching and learning the passive does not have to be dreadful, terrifying or exhausting. In order to involve students and make them more interested and positive about learning the passive, many different activities can be devised which will help overcome the prejudice about the passive and engage them more actively.

The three activities presented in this paper are structured in such a way that the students will find them both interesting and appealing. By highlighting the interdisciplinary approach to this grammatical issue, the activities manage to "conceal" that the primary goal is the acquisition of the passive. Instead, the students are presented with activities which draw on history, geography and international current affairs, making them concentrate on the content and not the structures they need to acquire.

a) Activity 1 – *The Unknown about the Known*

In the first exercise, entitled *The Unknown about the Known*, students are presented with three historical figures and little known facts about their lives (the materials are always related to topics covered in other courses – e.g. *The History of Western Civilization and World*

War II). Students are divided into groups and they need to decide which fact refers to which person. Once they have matched the facts with the people, they are required to write their answers using passive sentences (the passive structure has been explained beforehand). The answers are then checked with the language instructor. The unusual and unknown facts contribute to the activity being engaging; the activity can also be transformed into a competition, which provides an element of fun.

Activity 1:

1) WINSTON CHURCHILL 2) BENITO MUSSOLINI 3) JOSEPH STALIN	– in 1899 (<i>hold</i>) POW in South Africa as a newspaper correspondent [9]
	– at the age of 12 (<i>strike</i>) by a horse-drawn carriage and his arm (<i>damage</i>) permanently – arm (<i>reconstruct</i>) by extensive surgery, leaving it shorter and stiffened at the elbow [6]
	– at age 10 (<i>expel</i>) from a religious boarding school for stabbing a classmate in the hand [11]

Answers:

*In 1899 Winston Churchill **was held** POW in South Africa as a newspaper correspondent.*

*At the age of 12, Joseph Stalin **was stricken** by a horse-drawn carriage and his arm **was damaged** permanently. The arm **was reconstructed** by extensive surgery, leaving it shorter and stiffened at the elbow.*

*At the age of 10 Benito Mussolini **was expelled** from a religious boarding school for stabbing a classmate in the hand.*

b) Activity 2 – *The IO (International organization) quiz*

In the second activity, *The IO Quiz*, students are divided into groups and are given materials with information on different international organizations (the activity can be used for countries as well). The students' task is to write questions about the organizations in order to check the knowledge of the other group(s). All the questions and answers given need to be in the passive. The activity serves two purposes – it checks the knowledge of various international organizations and of passive structures. The students are awarded points for correct questions, as well as answers. The activity in the form of a quiz makes it more interesting and motivates the students to score as many points as possible. This particular activity is all the more convenient because, as part of their course, the first year students give presentations on international organizations and countries of their choice, which only makes them more actively engaged and more competitive.

Activity 2:

The United Nations:

- 1 founded in 1945;
- 2 mission and work of the United Nations guided by the purposes and principles in its founding Charter;
- 3 the UN divided into five branches;
- 4 programmes and funds financed through voluntary contributions;
- 5 states admitted in the UN by a decision of the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council;
- 6 currently made up of 193 Member States. [8]

Answers:

When was the UN founded? – It was founded...

How are UN programmes and funds financed? – They are financed...

How are states admitted in the UN? – They are admitted...

c) Activity 3 – *What's in the News?*

The final activity makes use of the fact that the passive is often employed in news stories and news articles, which are used as authentic course materials. Students are given the title of the article that will be dealt with in the lecture, e.g. *Nepal government criticized for blocking earthquake aid to remote area.*[4]

Firstly, students put the headline into its full form (*Nepal government is criticized for ...*). Before being given the full article the students try to guess what it is about, and are required to write their guesses using passive forms.

After going through the answers, the students are given the article to check who was the closest to the topic of the article. Finally, the students read the article carefully trying to find all the passive forms.

If there is sufficient time at the end of this activity, the students can turn the passive sentences into their active counterparts as an additional exercise.

Nepal government criticized for blocking earthquake aid to remote areas

*'They are not suffering so they do not care. They are just out to get the foreign money for themselves', said Rashmita Shashtra, a health worker in a village in Sindhulpalchowk district, 50 miles from Kathmandu, which had to receive a shipment of aid that **was** eventually **blocked** by authorities because it was 'unofficial'.*

*The village, where seven people died and which **has been almost entirely destroyed, has not yet been visited** by any government official or politician, though one aid agency managed to distribute some tarpaulins and rice late last week. Even villagers in accessible locations beside roads only 30 miles from Kathmandu told the Observer they **had yet to be contacted**. Hundreds of helicopter flights **have also been paid for** by private individuals, religious foundations or businesses. It is unclear whether these **will be allowed** to continue. Officials said private initiatives **would be permitted** if they **were coordinated** with local administrators. [4]*

5. Conclusion

Even though there is an ongoing tendency toward using the active voice, the passive voice is an essential grammatical category, especially in the specific case of ESP in international relations and diplomacy. Despite the perceived complexity and awkwardness of the passive, due to which the students tend to avoid it, at least on the conscious level, the syntactic features and formation rules of the passive are rather straightforward and can be acquired quite easily. In order to deal with the students' prejudice that the passive needs to be avoided, a number of activities can be devised that might appeal to students' genuine interest in social sciences (notably political science, history, geography, etc.) and help "conceal" the inner aim of such activities, the acquisition of the passive.

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